Meet the teens suing Canada over climate change; After years of activism, youth are frustrated by Ottawa's inaction

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Byline: Cherise Seucharan Star Vancouver

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Body

Sierra Robinson, 17, wants to swim in the Cowichan River again.

The teen climate activist grew up in the Cowichan Valley, where she remembers being able to swim and play in the local river with friends. But in the past several years, droughts have begun to dry up the rivers and lakes in the region, she says.

"Little seven-year-old me was playing in the river catching frogs, and now I'm 17 and going to the river ... and there is no river," Robinson said. "It's really upsetting and really scary. What will happen in the next 10 years?"

Those concerns about the future have now spurred Robinson and 14 other youth to take legal action against the federal government.

On Friday morning, they announced, from the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery, that they have filed a lawsuit claiming that the government has violated their rights to life, liberty and security of the person - which are guaranteed under Section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms - by contributing to high greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.

They were joined by international youth climate activist Greta Thunberg, as part of a climate rally in Vancouver.

Albert Lalonde, 17, stood in front of the 14 plaintiffs as he explained why they were taking the government to court.

"Canadian government cannot say they didn't know about climate change ...We will win a court-ordered climate recovery plan until we have secured our future on this planet," Lalonde said.

Key in the 67-page statement of claim are the climate change-related injuries the youth allege they have experienced, including asthma, fatigue, allergies, anxiety, depression, and, in Robinson's case, Lyme disease. Many plaintiffs also say their homes have been damaged by wildfires, flooding, hurricanes and melting permafrost.

They also claim that the government violated their equality rights under Section 15 of the charter, because youth will be affected by climate change more than any other group.

The 15 plaintiffs include Robinson, Lalonde, and 13 others: Cecilia La Rose, 15; Ira Reinhart-Smith, 15; Sophia Sidarous, 18; Montay Jesse Beaubien-Day, 12; Sadie Ava Vipond, 13; Haana Edenshaw, 16; Lucas Blake Prud'homme, 15; Zoe Grames-Webb, 13; Lauren Wright, 15; Sáj Milan Gray Starcevich, 13; Mikaeel Mahmood, 10; Madeline Laurendeau, 17; and Daniel Masuzumi, 19.

They are represented by the law firms of Arvay Finlay LLP and Tollefson Law Corp., and are partnered with the Pacific Centre for Environmental Law and Litigation, the David Suzuki Foundation and Our Children's Trust.

Chris Tollefson, legal co-counsel on the case, said that they were not aiming for monetary compensation.

"The endgame is a climate recovery plan based on the best available science. We don't care about compensation, or damages," Tollefson said. "It's about doing the right thing."

The day before the filing, the young plaintiffs and their families began arriving to Vancouver from across the country. Spilling into a cramped downtown Airbnb, the air filled with excitement, and nerves, as many of the 15 met for the first time.

But the youth were already linked by one commonality - despite their young age, they have all spent years raising awareness about climate change and are frustrated by a lack of action from the government.

Robinson and three other plaintiffs sat down with the Star Vancouver to talk about why they stepped forward to sue their own government.

Cecilia La Rose, 15, was part of her local Fridays for Future movement in Toronto when she was approached to join the lawsuit. La Rose said that despite her fears of being in the spotlight, it felt like something "tangible" she could do, before it was too late to prevent further climate change.

"It's frustrating to me to see how little the government has done after massive protests. I don't think it's as real for them, as it is for us."

She said she's already feeling the effects of climate change as her asthma, which she's had since she was six years old, is worsening. Extreme temperatures in Toronto have forced her to quit playing on her soccer team due to the effect on her breathing. The court filing also details the effects of flooding on her home, due to high rainfall.

She said the idea of a future of "climate chaos" has weighed heavily on her mind.

"I've grown up every day knowing my future is not a given," La Rose said.

"What I want out of life, it may not happen because the environment may not be stable enough for me to do that."

Ira Reinhart-Smith, who is 15 years old and hails from Caledonia, N.S., agreed. He said that growing up in a coastal area, he's concerned about severe weather conditions affecting his community.

"The storms in the last month, with Hurricane Dorian, I've never seen anything like that," he said. "Storms are becoming more powerful and more frequent. Youth across Nova Scotia are going to experience extreme problems due to climate change and the ocean rising."

He said there is no time to waste in taking action.

"The government has violated our charter rights and this is how we show the world that, and make them accountable."

Lalonde, who is from Montreal, said he was tired of feeling like nothing was being done about climate change by those in power in the federal government.

According to the court documents, extreme summer temperatures have caused Lalonde to experience dizziness and dehydration when taking part in regular outdoor activities.

"Being in school, we don't feel there is a point. We are told we are going to have a future, but the science is crystal clear," he said.

Lalonde expressed frustration with current efforts to encourage people to decrease individual consumption, stressing that action needs to be taken on a larger scale.

"Having an eco-responsible way of life is a privilege," he said. "This is about uniting and asking the government to use their power to make society as a whole more ecological."

Our Children's Trust is already behind more than 50 cases in the United States, including the landmark case Juliana v. U.S. It is spearheaded by 23-year-old Kelsey Juliana from Oregon and 20 other youth plaintiffs who allege that the U.S. government violated their constitutional rights to life, liberty and property by making decisions that have led to climate change.

A spokesperson from the David Suzuki Foundation said they estimated that if approved, the case could take as long as five years to be decided.

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